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**ACCIDENT AFTERMATH:
A COMMANDER'S HANDBOOK**

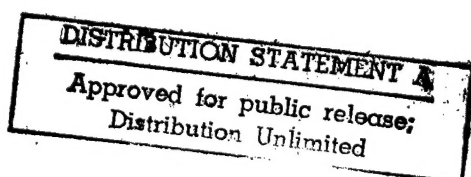
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ABSTRACT

TITLE: Accident Aftermath: A Commander's Handbook

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When an aircraft accident occurs, the squadron commander quickly finds himself in a whirlwind of activity, implemented by a plethora of individuals and organizations, many of which look to him for authoritative guidance, information, and help. Although most commands provide an overview of the sources of assistance available following an accident in pre-command seminars, this type of information is often put out of mind as the pleasures and pressures of command take their toll. When the unthinkable happens, it is too late to try to find those notes, or research a regulation. What a commander needs is an easy-to-read handbook for training and preparation to ensure the right things get accomplished at the right time following an accident. This paper is designed to draw together a myriad of Air Force Regulations, Pamphlets, Policy Directives, and Instructions, as well as experiences of the author and others, to provide that reference.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel William J. McKinney entered the Air Force through the University of Alabama's ROTC program in 1974. Following pilot training, he spent the next nine years flying the C-141A/B, serving as an aircraft commander, instructor, and flight examiner on the line and at the formal schoolhouse. In 1984, he was reassigned to Headquarters Military Airlift Command as an acquisition program manager in the Directorate of Operational Requirements and Tests. He attended Air Command and Staff College in 1986, and was selected to remain on the faculty in curriculum development and evaluation. An assignment back to flying followed in 1989, where he served as assistant operations officer and operations officer for the 57th Military Airlift Squadron at Altus Air Force Base, Oklahoma. In 1992, Col McKinney assumed command of the 36th Military Airlift Squadron at McChord Air Force Base, Washington, which experienced a multiple aircraft accident in the latter part of that year. He was selected to attend the Air War College in 1994.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Aircraft accidents are always unexpected. Although Air Force aviators recognize the inherent risks associated with their beloved profession, most choose to believe accidents occur to some other guy, in another unit. One of the major reasons for this denial is the United States Air Force's exceptional safety record. For example, in Fiscal Year 1993 (FY93) there were no Class A¹ mishaps for the KC-10, C-5, and B-52. This continued an historically excellent rate for many of our larger aircraft--the transport fleet of C-5, C-141, and C-130 have a combined lifetime Class A mishap rate of less than one in every 100,000 flying hours.² Fighter aircraft are also flown in an exceptionally safe manner, despite their demanding mission. The twin-engine F-15 Class A mishap rate for the same flying time is less than 3, and the single-engine F-16, less than 5.³ Obviously, we can look with some pride to this enviable flying safety record.

Rates, however, do not tell the whole story. When translated, they equate to lifetime losses of almost 260 F-15/16 aircraft. Although large aircraft accidents occur much less frequently, they normally are more catastrophic in terms of lost lives. The fact is that *all* accidents happen in *some* unit, to *someone's* friend / child / parent, and always unexpectedly. Although the chances may be slim that an accident will occur on a particular watch, a squadron commander must be prepared if one does.

When an aircraft accident occurs, a commander is quickly thrown into a whirlwind of activity, implemented by a plethora of individuals and organizations, many of which

¹ An accident is classified as a Class A mishap when reportable damage of at least \$1,000,000 occurs, an Air Force aircraft is destroyed, or a fatality or total disability results. Investigating and Reporting USAF Mishaps. Air Force Instruction 91-204. (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 22 Jul 94), paragraph 2.3.1.

² Major Dan Dougherty, "America's Global Reach-Air Force Airlifters," *Flying Safety* 49.12 (Dec 1993): 7.

³ Lt Col Kenneth J. Burke, "F-15 Mishap Summary," and Maj Bill Wagner, "F16 Mishap Summary," *Flying Safety* 50.1 (Jan 1994): 10-17.

look his/her way for authoritative guidance, information, and help. Although most commands provide an overview of the sources of assistance available following an accident in pre-command seminars, this information often comes through a "fire hose"--the important getting run together with the mundane. In addition, it is often put out of mind as the pleasures and pressures of command take their toll. A commander needs an easy-to-read handbook for training and preparation to ensure the right things get accomplished at the right time following an accident. This paper is designed to draw together the myriad of Air Force Regulations, Pamphlets, Policy Directives, and Instructions, as well as experiences of the author and others, to provide that reference.

The paper begins as the situation may--notification of an accident. It highlights how this information is initially handled and by whom. It follows with an explanation of the notification team and how it executes its duties. As base agencies are crucial to the support available to families of the deceased, their roles are individually discussed in some detail. Other family support actions are normally the responsibility of the squadron and squadron member families, including summary court and escort officer duties, visitor/caller screening, "meals on wheels", and follow-up (among others). Unit actions go well beyond that mandated by regulation and are often a matter of individual style, but "lessons learned" in this arena can prove extremely useful. The following section is devoted to some thoughts concerning the maintenance of morale and mission capability in the affected squadron, as well as how to better prepare squadron members and families for the unexpected--life goes on, but a recognition of the changes wrought is mandatory. Finally, the two separate mishap investigations are described in some detail, and their differences highlighted.

Although the paper is written to a small audience--the United States Air Force flying squadron commander--much of what will be discussed is applicable to a wide variety of commanders and supervisors. Although each situation is different, there is much common ground which can be used as a basis for a commander's pre- and post-

accident response. As a C-141 squadron commander whose unit experienced a traumatic aircraft accident, I found myself inadequately prepared to deal with the myriad of responsibilities, organizations, and individuals (not to mention emotions) involved with the ordeal. I trust this handbook will prove helpful to others if they also experience a "commander's nightmare".

CHAPTER TWO

NOTIFICATION

An aircraft accident can be reported in a variety of ways, from a citizens call to the local police or media, to an Air Traffic Control report of lost contact. Despite the manner in which the incident is first discovered, the military installation nearest the scene of a major accident involving DoD resources is responsible for coordinating response activities.⁴ Following notification, a series of actions begin which are generally handled by the base command post/command center. Specific actions are tailored by each base according to its particular circumstances to meet the requirements of various directives, including AFI 35-102, *Crisis Planning, Management, and Response*, and AFI 32-4001, *Disaster Preparedness Planning and Operations*. Implemented actions follow the phases of notification, response, withdrawal, and recovery. The following paragraphs specifically address the notification/response phases.

Upon notification, the command post will activate base crash nets to energize crash, fire, and rescue personnel to the scene of the accident. The installation commander will, depending on the nature of the incident, call in his crisis action team (CAT)/battle staff, who will assess the situation and help coordinate the response. This "Disaster Response Force"(DRF) is composed of four elements: the disaster control group (on scene response), the base command post, specialized teams (depending on the nature of the emergency), and unit control centers. Many of the measures taken by the DRF are transparent to a squadron commander, and include providing communications to the on-scene commander, containing hazardous materials, appointing an interim safety board, coordinating recovery actions, directing the impounding of records and tapes, establishing

⁴ Disaster Preparedness Planning and Operations. Air Force Instruction 32-4001. (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 6 May 94), paragraph 4.1.

a media center, coordinating with civilian authorities,⁵ and activating the casualty augmentation support team. What isn't transparent is the notification the squadron commander receives when it is one of his aircrews involved. That call comes like a blow to the stomach.

There are a number of thoughts that may go through a commander's mind when first notified of an accident. What happened? Why/how did it happen? What will he tell the family/families involved? The most important, however, is to first establish exactly *who* was involved. This may be readily apparent in a single seat fighter, but in a multi-place bomber, tanker, or airlifter, it may not be as easily ascertained. For example, do your mission commanders ever make last minute changes to crew complements based on changing training/operational requirements, weather, or individual health? These changes should be fully documented on available flight orders or passenger manifests. But have you ever seen times when they were not? Establishing, without a doubt, who is involved is a commander's first priority.

Flight plans, aircrew orders, and passenger manifests are your best informational sources to establish involvement, but also try to confirm their accuracy with other means. Personnel at the accident site must additionally establish the identity of the casualties, although this is often difficult depending on the location of the mishap. The Air Force must obtain conclusive evidence before reporting the death of an individual, but does not require positively identified recovered remains for conclusive evidence of death. Information indicating that an individual could not have survived, and total remains equaling the number known on board (see how important those orders/manifests are?) suffice for evidence of death.⁶

⁵ If an accident occurs on property under civil jurisdiction, civil authorities oversee response and recovery operations. The Air Force must work with those authorities to protect its resources and provide assistance. See AFI 32-4001, paragraph 4.1.5.

⁶ Casualty Services. Air Force Instruction 36-3002. (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 26 Aug 94), paragraph 2.7.

As the identity and status of the casualties are established, you will be working with a Casualty Assistance Representative (CAR) from your base Casualty Service Office (a section in the Military Personnel Flight), who will help prepare the teams necessary to perform notification duties. Each team will consist of the notification officer (usually the member's commander, otherwise must be a Field Grade Officer), chaplain, and medical attendant. If there are a great number of casualties, you will probably want to use your operations officer and other field graders in the unit and known to the families, prior to using other base officers with little relationship to the families. This will help limit the delay to the affected families. Although not required, you might find it beneficial to also have a spouse of a senior squadron/wing officer or a close friend join each notification team. A couple of our wives ended up staying with the new widows the remainder of the night to help comfort them. If the NOK do not live in the local area, Headquarters Air Force Military Personnel Center will task the closest base with responsibility for the notification. You will follow up with a letter of circumstance and condolence. Be advised, if you as the commander do not personally notify the next of kin, you must make a personal visit as soon as possible.⁷ Another consideration is the possibility of a second notification if the first is limited to reportage of missing/presumed dead vice a confirmed fatality. This may happen if there is difficulty or delay getting to the accident site to confirm the casualty status.

When the teams are established and assembled, casualty assistance personnel will provide helpful advice on how best to approach your duties (including a training film), last known addresses of the next of kin, and the notification letter. The letter is not required if the commander delivers the message, however we found it still beneficial as a basis for what to say in this most difficult situation. Remember, your function is to try to soften the blow and demonstrate the Air Force's genuine concern for its personnel and their families.⁸

⁷ IBID, paragraph 3.10.9.

⁸ AFI 36-3002, attachment 16, paragraph A16.1.5.

One must recognize there will be an incredible number of things happening all at once when an accident occurs, and they can't be accomplished alone. Although the wing's DRF will be taking care of many of them, you'll need help in the unit responding to inquiries from higher authorities, squadron, and family members. For example, when our squadron experienced our accident, CNN had already broadcast the news of the accident and the fact it involved two C-141 aircraft flying out of our base, prior to our ability to officially notify the next of kin. You'll need someone manning the phones who can diplomatically and sympathetically address the questions which may come from understandably upset squadron members or family. Due to the instantaneous nature of today's news, there may be a considerable delay between when the spouse or other family members hear of an accident and when they receive official notification. It is very difficult to not "unofficially notify" next of kin (NOK) when they know there was an accident, know their spouse was flying, and every other flyer has phoned their family to say "I'm safe". Air Force policy is that the NOK will be personally notified, but "If a relative calls the Air Force to ask about a member's status before they receive official notification, the member's commander or a designated representative tells the caller the member's status during the call."⁹ We found it helpful to have a close friend to go stay with a couple of the spouses (who had called immediately following the broadcast) while they waited for further information.

The actual notification requires service dress uniform, and as mentioned above, is normally performed by the individual's commander. If you do not know the family well, identify yourself and ensure you are speaking with the NOK. Relay the information concerning the accident as succinctly as possible, but avoid speculation as to the details or possible causes. Ensure you determine if the NOK requires any immediate assistance (such as notifying other relatives), and their understanding that a CAR will contact them

⁹ IBID, paragraph 3.10.3.

within the next 24 hours to provide additional assistance. Questions about survivor benefits, burial, or similar matters should be deferred to the casualty or mortuary affairs representatives.¹⁰

One final thought--if your unit does not normally operate on a 24 hour basis (and your wing commander doesn't activate base unit control centers), you'll probably still want to establish a full-time operation for the first few days following the mishap, just to provide adequate support for your squadron family. One can additionally use the full-time support to gather required information that the safety investigation board will need, such as flight records, personnel and evaluation folders, orders, etc.

In this chapter we have examined the initial actions in the first few hours following an accident, who is involved, and what are some of their responsibilities. The squadron commander may feel overwhelmed by the pace and emotional requirements of those involved (as well as his own emotions), but there are a number of base agencies ready and required to provide able assistance when an accident occurs. These functions will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁰ AFI 36-3002, paragraph 3.10.15.6.

CHAPTER III

BASE SUPPORT

When an aircraft accident occurs, a number of on-base agencies/units are involved in the effective execution of disaster response as well as those activities necessary for effective support to the families of the deceased. Some of these have been mentioned earlier, such as command post and the casualty assistance office. This section describes other help available on base, most of which comes automatically via Air Force policy and directive (or now, Instructions). Despite the transparency of the support activities to the squadron commander, it is very helpful to have a basic understanding of who these actors are and how they assist the next of kin and your unit.

CASUALTY ASSISTANCE

It is Air Force policy that all military members are periodically advised of the rights and benefits they and their dependents enjoy. Additionally, the Air Force will furnish counseling concerning the availability of advice and assistance in time of need.¹¹ The Air Force provides casualty service counseling through the Mission Support Squadron's casualty assistance office. A Casualty Assistance Representative (CAR) will be appointed by the MPF Chief to each primary next of kin (PNOK), normally the spouse or parents of the deceased, and will provide a broad range of support including:

- Counseling regarding rights
- Help with filing applications for benefits and privileges
- Resolving problems and complaints.¹²

The CAR will make contact with the NOK within 24 hours of their notification to arrange a casualty assistance visit. During this and follow-up visits, the NOK will be

¹¹ Personal Affairs. Air Force Policy Directive 36-31, (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 27 Sep 93), paragraph 1.2.

¹² AFI 36-3002, paragraph 4.1.2.

helped with the applications for various benefits that are paid by the USAF, DoD, Veterans' Administration, Social Security, and Servicemen's Group Life Insurance. Attachments to AFI 36-3002 illustrate the benefits due dependents and survivors of the different classes of Air Force casualties (active duty, retired, reserve, etc.). The CAR's charter also includes assisting the NOK with obtaining any documentation available under the Freedom of Information Act or other investigative reports.

The Casualty Assistance Office also assists the squadron commander with his responsibilities concerning required letters of circumstance and condolence (to those he was unable to visit). For example, next of kin living out of the local area will normally be notified by an appointed notification officer, not the commander. Letters are then required (and condolence letters are recommended even if the commander made a personal notification) and are due out within five calendar days of notification.¹³ One of the hardest letters I had to write was to one sergeant's minor children, who were considered the PNOK as he was divorced. They were to be read that letter when they were old enough to understand the circumstances of his death.

One can easily see that the Casualty Assistance Office performs major roles for both the NOK and the commander. It behooves the commander to help his unit become familiar with those functions to better understand the capabilities and limitations of the CAR before one becomes necessary. Another office having direct interface and thus a large role with NOK is Mortuary Affairs, which is discussed in the next section.

¹³ IBID, paragraphs 5.1.2 - 5.1.5.

MORTUARY AFFAIRS

The mortuary affairs program is mandated by Air Force Policy Directive 34-5, and implemented by AFIs 34-501 and 34-502. It provides for the care of remains of deceased personnel and assists the NOK with the following:

- Shipping or delivery of the remains for burial or cremation
- Disposition of personal effects and property of the deceased
- Arranging ceremonial and military funeral honors.

Those eligible for mortuary benefits include active duty Air Force members and their dependents, retired Air Force members, and other Air Force/Army Air Corps veterans. As opposed to a personnel program like Casualty Assistance, Mortuary Affairs is handled by a wing's Services Squadron, and the primary mortuary affairs officer is the Services Commander, director, or deputy.¹⁴ Many wings, however, will have a services officer other than those listed actually perform the required mortuary functions.

Mortuary entitlements for active duty personnel include the appointments of summary court and escort officers (which will be discussed in the next chapter), military honors, transportation of remains and NOK to burial site, burial in a government cemetery with headstone, funeral and burial costs, flag provided to NOK, among others. The mortuary affairs officer will brief the NOK on their entitlements, but the squadron commander is often asked questions by family members concerning this very important event. Good advice is to have a general knowledge of this information, but always defer to the expert for specific guidance.

A commander does have an immediate role, though, in ensuring the security of the deceased' personal property. This will greatly assist the proper disposition of that property in accordance with NOK wishes. Obviously, property of accompanied members will be secured by the family.

¹⁴ Mortuary Affairs. Air Force Instruction 34-501. (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 28 Jul 94), attachment 2, paragraph A2.4.2.

The role of mortuary affairs can be summarized through the sequence of duties performed. These include:

- Recovery of remains
- Identification of remains
- Mortuary affairs briefs NOK (following casualty affairs brief)
- Appointment of summary court officer
- Appointment of escort
- Prepare and ship remains
- Military honors and interment.¹⁵

OTHER BASE SUPPORT

Other agencies on base also furnish considerable assistance during the first hours following the mishap, and, for many, months after. These include public affairs, the judge advocate, the base chaplain, and family services.

Air Force policy is to provide the public unclassified information on all activities, including accidents and incidents, consistent with national security responsibilities.¹⁶ The previous chapter mentioned one of the first measures taken by the Disaster Response Force is to establish a media center so all releasable, commander-approved information is available within an hour after the accident is reported.¹⁷ This initial release will include a general description of the accident, the time and location, departure point and destination, number of crew members and passengers, type of aircraft and mission, and the fact that a board of officers will investigate.¹⁸ Names of the accident victims will be withheld until the NOK are notified, and there is often great pressure for more information immediately. Normally, the media understand how to work with the military in this situation, but sometimes there may be some inquiries made directly to the squadron or the families. It is

¹⁵ Mortuary Affairs Program. Excerpted from a briefing prepared by 42d Services Sq, Maxwell AFB, AL, 15 Feb 95.

¹⁶ Crisis Planning, Management, and Response. Air Force Instruction 35-102. (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 22 Jun 94), paragraph 1.2.

¹⁷ IBID, paragraph 6.2.

¹⁸ IBID, paragraph 6.2.1.

incumbent upon the commander to brief his personnel that such requests will be forwarded to the public affairs office.

The Judge Advocate (JA) also plays a number of important roles following an accident. The publicly releasable accident investigation is handled through legal channels, as its purpose is to gather evidence for claims, litigation, and discipline (this will be covered more fully in Chapter VI). During this investigation, a line of duty determination will be made which can definitely affect NOK benefits. Essentially, misconduct is not considered in the line of duty, and violations of flight orders constitute misconduct.¹⁹ Finally, the JA will provide guidance to the summary court officers concerning property disposition and will review the summary court file for legal sufficiency before closing the case.²⁰

Although the legal office plays an important role, one cannot overemphasize the importance of the base chaplain to the emotional and spiritual health of many, both intimately and not so closely involved with an aircraft accident. One can reconcile, to an extent, casualties as a result of wartime activities. It is extremely hard to find reason for loss of life during peacetime training, even though there may be inherent risks in certain fields of endeavor. The Chaplain, having normally had more experience with grief and bereavement, can provide help during initial notification, memorial and funeral services, and follow-up assistance.²¹ They are a great source of strength and emotional support during one of the most trying times your unit will ever encounter. A squadron commander owes it to his troops and to himself to ensure a chaplain is a part of the unit before this support may be needed.

¹⁹ Civil Law. Air Force Pamphlet 110-3. (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 11 Dec 87), paragraphs 8-3 a (2) and 8-12 b.

²⁰ Disposition of Personal Property. Air Force Instruction 34-502. (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 22 Jul 94), paragraph 4.8.

²¹ Chaplain Service Responsibilities and Procedures. Air Force Instruction 52-101. (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 22 Nov 94), paragraph 1.6.

The final base support agency is Family Support Center, which provides a myriad of programs in support of families and individuals alike. They have a dual mission; to help families navigate the base-wide family support system, and to help base leadership and agencies respond to family needs. This help to families normally comes in the form of a referral to an appropriate base or community agency after they assist the family in assessing their problems.

The above paragraphs highlight the most prominent base support agencies a commander will encounter following an aircraft accident. The time to become familiar with their functions, and their personnel, is before they are needed. Personal interviews and having them brief at commander's call could pay great dividends.

CHAPTER IV

FAMILY SUPPORT

Our most precious resource is our people. Supporting them, and as an extension, their families, is one of the two most important duties a commander undertakes (the other, of course, is accomplishing the mission). An aircraft accident can quickly adversely affect both.

Post-accident family support normally begins with the initial notification of loss. As mentioned in Chapter II, however, it may very well begin before that due to a family member hearing/seeing a report of an accident on the radio or television. In either case, the best support one can initially offer is presence, normally that of a close friend. If a friend is unavailable (or you cannot find out quickly who that might be), a more senior officer's spouse may be able to provide that initial sensitivity necessary to the bereaved family. They will probably be unable to extend their stay much beyond the first night, so assign someone from the unit to maintain close contact for the extended future. In addition, energize your squadron members to help with meals, child-care, and other responsibilities. For example, someone to act as a "buffer" answering the phone and door is often very welcome. They need to keep accurate records of all calls and guests, as well as food and flowers delivered. This will prove helpful for later family acknowledgment. Arrange for a squadron friend to be with the family when Air Force personnel are scheduled there for official business to take notes--the griever may forget everything that is said in those important meetings. Although most families will quickly see the arrival of relatives to help with these chores, recognize they often can still use some help so don't quickly abandon your support. Do, however, ensure the bereaved family understands what your group is providing and when. In addition, continue to invite the spouse/family

to squadron activities--allow *them* to decide when is the best time to pull back (if they do at all). As discussed earlier, there are support agencies from the base which will contact the NOK to provide many avenues of assistance, but they do not substitute for presence.

Squadron personnel will probably also be involved in two activities directed by Air Force policy, summary court officer or escort officer duty. In each capacity, they will have extensive contact with the NOK, so make your recommendations carefully. The summary court officer (SCO) is appointed by the installation commander, normally based on recommendation from the deceased's squadron commander. Their duties may take up to 45 days to be completed,²² and can require almost full-time dedication. For this reason, commanders are discouraged from appointing "a person who serves in a flying, deployment, or PCS status, or who serves in an exercise that would interfere with Summary Court duties."²³ This may prove impractical in a flying wing, and also disappoint the NOK, who may request a squadron friend to serve in that role. The squadron commander must weigh these conflicting needs when deciding whom to recommend. I was able to use my flyers by restructuring my unit's training schedule and obtaining support from the other flying squadrons to meet mission requirements. Escort duty is normally completed in a couple of days, and thus should not interfere with normal duties.

Summary court officers work directly with the mortuary affairs officer and the NOK to collect, secure, and inventory all personal property of the deceased. The SCO will account for and return issued supply items and other military forms or documents in the possession of the deceased. He will coordinate the packing and transportation of personal items (to include an automobile) back to the NOK. This is time-consuming and often frustrating duty, in that the authorized (by AFI 34-502) recipient may or may not be the same as one identified in a will, easily located, coordinated with, or exactly whom family thinks it should be. For example, we had a father who claimed to know his son's

²² AFI 34-502, paragraph 6.

²³ IBID, Attachment 3, paragraph A3.3.1.1.

desires should tragedy befall him. We had a number of reasons to believe his story. However, the eventual recipient of the property was the divorced wife, as custodial parent of his minor children. As commander, you will be a sounding board for your people serving as summary court officers, and will need to supervise their activities, but you can't do their job for them. In addition, your follow-up with NOK families to see if their needs are being met will head off many small difficulties before they become big ones. Finally, the SCO's case file will be reviewed by both the mortuary officer and the staff judge advocate prior to the installation commander's approval for final disposition, so your choice for this duty must be a reasonably effective staff officer.

The other duty squadron members may be asked to perform is that of escort for the remains to place of interment. The NOK may choose to ask for a particular person to do this (which is called a special escort) or the Air Force may appoint one. Only one escort is authorized at expense of the government, and, if appointed, must be of equal or higher rank than the deceased.²⁴ The escort will also work with the mortuary officer, and will (if not a NOK) perform military duties for the burial, including providing reimbursement paperwork for the burial and funeral and interment flags. A military escort represents the Air Force at the funeral and can emotionally tough duty, so if it's your choice, make it wisely.

²⁴ AFI 34-501, Attachment 7, "One Escort", and paragraph A7.2.

CHAPTER V

THE SQUADRON FAMILY

An aircraft accident is almost as devastating to members of a squadron and their families as it is to the family of the deceased. The adverse effects to morale can almost prove overwhelming. A commander must summon all his human relations tools, and those of base support agencies, to help foster the healing process.

Each member of a unit will be affected in a different way, and the commander must recognize that uniqueness. It is not unreasonable for some to want to jump in an airplane and continue on as if nothing has happened. Others will need some time off to grieve personally. Spouses may worry about the safety of the mission or aircraft, as might the aircrews themselves. In peacetime it is normal to "sit down" for a short period following a mishap to allow time for these things to be sorted out. Use your available supervisors (flight commanders, enlisted superintendents, first sergeant), as well as flight surgeons and chaplains, to help make informed decisions concerning the fitness of your personnel to start or continue their missions.

If the accident takes place at your home station, schedule a commander's call to bring the squadron together, aircrew and spouses, to discuss it, clarify what you can about the circumstances, and perhaps relieve some apprehensions. This is an opportunity to bring in some of your base support agencies to explain their availability to meet the needs of your squadron families. A dramatic loss such as an aircraft accident will also often be formally acknowledged through a memorial service, which can provide the same sense of closure available through the funeral, probably performed at the members' hometown.

If a memorial service is anticipated, understand that many of the accident victims' family members will probably attend. Parents or other relatives will want to meet their son

or daughter's last friends and acquaintances, and may want a private session with the commander. Allow yourself some time during this hectic period to accommodate their wishes--it will pay off in your peace of mind as well as theirs. Others outside the unit may, depending on the closeness of the base, feel the same need for a service as those within. What was a small service for the unit may grow into a base-wide event. Although the base chaplain is ready to render such a service, call on the assistance of your fellow squadron commanders to help coordinate the myriad of required details, such as facilities arrangement, set-up, parking and transportation, and honor guard. You'll have your hands full coordinating the program, trying to ascertain exactly which families will be represented and by whom, when they will arrive, and any other assistance they might need. As with any military ceremony, proper protocol is necessary. One nice touch is to have a smaller reception for just the families and squadron following the service. This allows a place for them to meet and be together, a great part of the healing process. Our wing wives' group set this up and arranged for baby sitters totally on their own--a real help.

Because the squadron will be the only focal point many in the community can identify with the tragedy, it will receive many expressions of sympathy, including cards, letters, and flowers. Ensure you immediately set up a method to track this, and have your executive officer or other administrative help start drafting letters of appreciation as soon as you can. In addition, we found many squadron members and others coming to the squadron with offers of help and to express their sympathy. If you have the space, a room set up as a reception area can better accommodate the visitors. We also had a number of people express an interest in donating money for a memorial to the lost crewmembers. Our staff judge advocate ruled we in the military could not handle the money, so we engaged the local chamber of commerce to establish an account to which those interested could donate. We eventually had enough money to fund a small monument and plaque in memory of those who perished. An unanticipated problem was the requirement to gain command approval for the donated monument to be accepted by the base. The cost of its

upkeep is the hang-up, so coordinate with civil engineering, as they are the focal point for facility maintenance. Of course, this necessitated a design, contracted construction, and another ceremony, which we used to acknowledge the accident's one year anniversary. Despite these problems, I believe this turned out to be a great facilitator of the healing process, and well worth the added cost in time and effort.

As mentioned earlier, the commander must make the call as to when his people are ready to resume the mission. For some this may be almost immediately; for others, a little longer. But the mission will continue, and it is up to everyone to ensure the safest execution possible. Proper training, motivation, and experience are paramount in mission success, as it is in preparation for the inevitable failure. Squadron commanders must prepare his personnel for those failures which may end up as mishaps. Much of this preparation is overlooked in the belief that the unthinkable cannot happen, or will not happen "to me". Although mandated by regulation, military members often fail to update emergency data cards (DD Form 93). For example, how many of your people have parents listed as NOK? Are these parents still at the same address? We had one set of parents call a roommate when they heard the news of the accident on television. The Air Force had been unable to locate them in a timely manner due to their recent move. Only the individual serviceman can provide that information. When was the last time your folks updated their wills or insurance paperwork? Have they signed up for the new Servicemen's Group Life Insurance benefits as they told their spouse they would? Have they separated or divorced since they assigned beneficiaries?

How well do you really know your people? If your sergeant and his spouse were to be involved in an auto accident, would you know who a close friend would be to check on any children at school (which school?) or pets at home? We live in a highly mobile society, especially in the military, and are less likely to have close, long-time neighbors and friends in the local area. One way to ensure you have this information, and have it handy, is to design a squadron emergency information form and ask each member of the unit to

accomplish one on arrival in unit. This doesn't take the place of required personnel forms, but augments them for unexpected emergencies. An example of one such form is at the appendix.

Finally, although we all seem to endure base emergency response exercises, they provide an excellent way to find out if you are really prepared for an accident. Do your best to motivate your people--and limit the *simulations* to the minimum necessary. As with training for improbable wartime scenarios, you become better prepared to meet them, and thus help deter some of their adverse effects should the unthinkable happen in your unit.

CHAPTER VI

THE SAFETY AND ACCIDENT INVESTIGATIONS

"What happened? What went wrong? How, *and why*, did it happen?" These and other questions will be on the tips of the tongues of everyone remotely involved with the accident. Loved ones and friends, those performing the same or similar missions, other interested parties, and often the media, will be asking these questions and expecting quick answers. As mentioned in chapter four, your friendly public affairs officer is tasked to handle outside requests, but you should be able to describe the impending investigations and what questions they will answer to your unit and the surviving family members. The following paragraphs provide a description of the two types of investigations, highlight their similarities and differences, and stress the importance of your role.

THE SAFETY INVESTIGATION

Mishap safety investigations are mandated by Air Force Policy Directive 91-2, Safety Programs, and implemented by Air Force Instruction 91-204, Investigating and Reporting USAF Mishaps. Their purpose is "to determine all factors, human, material, and environmental, which directly or indirectly contribute to the mishap." This information is then used "to eliminate the cause factors and thus help prevent recurrence of similar mishaps."²⁵ This is important to understand--a safety investigation is not designed to fix punitive blame, but to prevent further accidents.

The results of the investigation are for official use only (FOUO), and are published in limited-use reports containing privileged information. Specifically, only certain portions of the report are releasable to those outside the normal Air Force channels, and the

²⁵ Guide to Mishap Investigation. Air Force Pamphlet 127-1. (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 29 May 87), paragraph 1-4.

information contained within "is exempt by law from disclosure outside the Air Force safety community."²⁶ This limited-use status allows Air Force investigators to provide a promise of confidentiality to those who give witness statements, to government contractors who were involved in the design, production, or maintenance of the equipment concerned, and to all aircrews regarding their recorded internal aircraft crew communications. This confidentiality helps to establish "a frank and open exchange of information without fear of incrimination or otherwise adverse action."²⁷ As stated in AFI 91-204:

The Air Force does not use limited-use privileged reports (including message reports produced after the preliminary 8-hour report), their attachments, or information extracted from them, as evidence for punitive, disciplinary, or adverse administrative actions, for determining the misconduct or line-of-duty status of any person, in flying evaluation boards hearings or reviews, to determine pecuniary liability or liability in claims for or against the United States, or in any other manner in any action by or against the United States.²⁸

A squadron commander should ensure everyone in the unit understands these two concepts, confidentiality and limited-use, for they are central to the effectiveness of the mishap prevention program. It is imperative those with access to information in the report adhere to the policy. This is often easier said than done. As mentioned earlier, everyone (and, understandably so, especially family members) will want to know what, how, and why. It can be extremely hard to not provide your best guess, but no one is well-served by speculation, and the release of privileged information concerning the mishap may be grounds for disciplinary actions. Despite the obvious connection of family members to those involved in the mishap, they are not privy to the mishap report itself or its results. Needless to say, the commander must make everyone aware of the necessity of this system

²⁶ AFI 91-204, paragraph 1.12.1.1.

²⁷ IBID, paragraph 1.12.1.2.

²⁸ IBID, paragraph 1.12.1.4.

and the benefits derived from it. (Family members *are* able to obtain a copy of the accident investigation report, discussed in the next section).

The safety investigation begins almost immediately following an accident, as the wing commander nearest the mishap will appoint an interim safety investigation board to protect and preserve vital evidence.²⁹ This includes site photography, obtaining initial witness statements, taking fuel and other samples, as well as toxicity testing for involved military members and civilian employees. These supporting duties are complete when the formal safety investigation board (SIB) assumes control of the investigation.

The SIB will be appointed by the MAJCOM commander, who is the investigating and convening authority. This board consists of a president (colonel or above for all Class A mishaps), an investigating officer, a pilot current and qualified in the aircraft, a maintenance member experienced in the aircraft, a flight surgeon, and others deemed necessary by the president. Members must be impartial, thus almost always will come from another base. However, the wing commander of the mishap aircraft may also have a representative on the team to serve as his liaison to the investigation.³⁰

The squadron commander's involvement with the investigation will begin immediately as he will be tasked to provide a plethora of documents which may pertain to the mishap, including personnel records, flight (and evaluation) records, crew orders, passenger manifests, flight plans, weather briefs, etc. The SIB will determine its requirements for persons to be interviewed, which could mean fencing of aircrew until its completion. As commander, you should also prepare yourself to be questioned concerning the crew members professional traits and demeanor, skills, and training. In addition, you will be asked questions which you may believe impugn your leadership or others in your unit. This will be a difficult process, yet should be approached remembering the purpose behind the investigation--*to prevent further accidents*.

²⁹ AFI 91-204, paragraph 1.2.5.2.

³⁰ IBID, paragraph 3.5.3.

Once the investigation is complete, the board will publish its results in a formal report consisting of two sections. The first section, Part I, contains the factual information that may be disclosed outside the USAF; for example logs, directives, photographs, records, and recordings of air-to-air, air-to-ground, ground-to-air transmissions. Part II contains the board analysis and other privileged information that cannot be disclosed. This includes **findings** (chronologically arranged steps essential in the mishap sequence), **causes** (deficiencies, "the correction, elimination, or avoidance of which would likely have prevented or mitigated the mishap damage or significant injury"³¹), and **recommendations** (feasible solutions related to the causes). These recommendations may require unit action, with appropriate corrective action forwarded to the MAJCOM.

THE ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION

The accident investigation is different from the safety investigation in that its purpose is to "gather and preserve evidence for claims, litigation, disciplinary and adverse administrative actions, and for all purposes other than mishap prevention."³² Its basis is in the law, as its guidance in AFI 51-503 is directed by AFD 51-5, Section B, *Military Legal Affairs*. An accident investigation is required for any accident designated a Class A mishap, which may cause a fatality, permanent disability, litigation against the United States or its contractors, or which may generate claims in excess of \$200,000 or significant public interest.³³

The same convening authority (normally the MAJCOM commander) that could or did order the safety investigation will order the accident investigation. Because its findings may be used for punitive actions however, the 51-503 accident investigation must be conducted totally separate from the mishap investigation. This means those from the organization that experienced the mishap, SIB members or technical advisors, or safety

³¹ AFI 91-204, paragraph 3.14.1.

³² Aircraft, Missile, Nuclear, and Space Accident Investigations. Air Force Instruction 51-503. (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 25 Jul 94), paragraph 1.2.1.

³³ AFI 51-503, paragraph 1.1.

officers (who would have access to Part II of the mishap report) are ineligible to serve on the accident investigation team. The team will consist of an investigator (current and qualified in the aircraft and senior in rank to the persons involved in the accident), a legal advisor, and various technical advisors.³⁴

The accident investigation may be conducted concurrent with the safety investigation, but as safety takes precedence, the accident investigation frequently starts and is completed after the latter. This is often necessary as witnesses, the wreckage, non-privileged photographs and recordings, and medical as well as other evidence are not available until released by the safety board. Once released, the accident team will examine the evidence much as the safety team did, with one notable exception--the interviews.

Testimony provided the accident investigation board is given as one would testify in a courtroom, under oath. The interview is given by the investigating officer and is attended by the legal advisor, who ensures "the advice and questions to the witnesses are proper."³⁵ Because of the differences in the purpose of the investigation and the fact that one's testimony is releasable to the public, one is often hesitant to be as forthcoming and candid. In addition, as one is asked to swear/affirm to the truthfulness of the testimony, the atmosphere, according to a majority of my squadron members, is more often felt as adversarial. AFI 51-503 recognizes that "witnesses may provide the same factual information to both safety and accident investigators," which may seem redundant to those in your unit being interviewed. They must understand the accident investigators have to obtain their information through their own questioning, thus ensuring the complete independence of the investigations.

Once the accident board completes its investigation, like the safety board, it will forward the results to the convening authority for approval. Results include factual information and, as required by federal statute, the accident investigator's opinion about

³⁴ AFI 51-503, paragraph 1.4.

³⁵ AFI 51-503, paragraph 1.10.

the cause of the accident, or the significant contributing factors.³⁶ The accident investigator or other appropriate individual, will personally deliver a report to the spouse or next-of-kin. The individual delivering the report will then explain the circumstances of the accident and findings of the accident board.³⁷ As it is necessary to ensure privileged information is not compromised regarding the same accident, no one who had access to the safety report or its messages will be sent in this capacity.³⁸ Remember that the accident investigation normally follows the safety investigation so there may be considerable delay before a family may be given in-depth information about the accident. One must understand the reasons for the delay and be able to articulate them to the family members with sympathy for their feelings. In addition, the media may obtain a copy of the report through the Freedom of Information Act, and one should be prepared to comment if requested, having first coordinated through your base public affairs officer.

Safety and accident investigations are both painstaking and painful undertakings to those close to the mishap, and those charged with the responsibility of their completion. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, they serve two separate purposes, accident prevention and protection of government interests. Both meet legitimate needs of the service, the families and friends, and the public, and are therefore absolutely necessary requirements.

³⁶ Crisis Planning, Management, and Response. Air Force Instruction 35-102. (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 22 Jun 94), paragraph 6.12.1.1.

³⁷ AFI 51-503, paragraph 1.16.2.

³⁸ IBID.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Accidents will happen. Whether one occurs on our shift as a commander may be out of our control, although as one of our primary duties we try to ensure our people are trained to *safely* accomplish the mission. If an accident does happen, especially one in which there are one or more fatalities, a squadron commander faces demands well beyond the ordinary at the same time he is trying to cope with his own feelings of loss.

This paper was designed to pull together many of the sources already available into a more easily understood format as a preparatory document for new commanders. It initially discussed the notification process, explained who was involved, and their duties and responsibilities. It followed with an description of the various base agencies that can and do provide support to the families of the deceased. You and your people will probably work directly with two of them, casualty assistance and mortuary affairs, as summary court or escort officers. Although much is accomplished by agencies outside the squadron, many of the support activities should be energized by you and members of your unit immediately upon notification of the mishap. As mentioned earlier, presence is the most important support one can offer to the bereaved, and is needed immediately. A system of continued presence will prove the most beneficial assistance one can offer throughout this ordeal. Also discussed were the effects on the unit itself and some ways to try to help squadron members through their period of mourning, recognizing the ever-present mandate of mission capability. As commanders we can highly encourage our folks to ensure their family's preparation for possible adverse circumstances. Education provided through your commander's call will go a long way in this endeavor. The final

topic was a look at the purposes and differences of the two mishap investigations and their governing instructions.

Hopefully, you have found this handbook enlightening and helpful. It obviously cannot answer all questions nor provide all guidance concerning your duties and responsibilities following an accident, but perhaps it has opened your eyes to the possibility of the unthinkable, and led you to inquire of other sources before it happens to you.

APPENDIX

EMERGENCY INFORMATION

NAME:	HOME PHONE:
STREET ADDRESS:	
CITY:	STATE: ZIP:

PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT:	WORK PHONE:
----------------------	-------------

CHILD'S NAME	BIRTH DATE	SCHOOL ATTENDING
1. _____		
2. _____		
3. _____		
4. _____		
5. _____		

PETS (TYPE, NAME, LOCATION, VET)

RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE: PASTOR/PREACHER/RABBI/CHAPLAIN/ETC:	CHURCH ATTENDING:
--	-------------------

<u>PEOPLE TO CONTACT IN AN EMERGENCY</u>			
<u>CATEGORY</u>	<u>NAME</u>	<u>PHONE</u>	<u>REMARKS</u>
SQUADRON	_____	_____	_____
SQUADRON	_____	_____	_____
NEIGHBOR	_____	_____	_____
NEIGHBOR	_____	_____	_____
RELATIVE	_____	_____	_____
RELATIVE	_____	_____	_____
OTHER	_____	_____	_____

REMARKS: _____

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